

May 2015 extended essay reports

ENGLISH A

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0-7	8-15	16-22	23-28	29-36

The range and suitability of the work submitted

The large majority of the essays were submitted in Category 1 and thus comprised a straightforward analysis of a literary text or texts. Category 2 essays were less popular.

Category 3 essays are slowly growing in popularity and schools could usefully revisit the possibilities with this option, especially for students studying the Language and Literature course.

This year in all three categories examiners saw a number of outstanding essays from students who had made fresh and original choices of texts and topic. However, there are still a very large number of essays on 'well-worn' themes: Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby' (American Dream); Salinger's 'The Catcher in the Rye' (adolescence/character-based), Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' (dystopian/feminist); Orwell's '1984' Huxley's 'Brave New World' (dystopian), and Khomeini's 'The Kite Runner' and 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' (cultural/feminist.)

In such cases, as many examiners pointed out, an innovative approach and some recourse to secondary sources, as well as a genuine attempt to set the work in its literary context, is required to offer something beyond the ordinary.

There is also a trend towards a set of favourite topics emerging for Category 3 essays, (perhaps influenced by course units in textbooks?) e.g. the "Dove for Real Beauty" and Benetton campaigns.

Topics based on young adult fiction, or fiction which has been adapted for film or television, remain popular (George RR Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire'; Stephenie Meyer's 'Twilight' series) but here, as always, students need to be circumspect about the literary merit of the works.

Other texts in this category included 'Matched' by Ally Condie (the Matched trilogy), 'Rapture' by Lauren Kate (the 'Fallen' series), 'Beautiful Disaster' by Jamie McGuire and 'The Giver' by

Lois Lowry, where the novels simply did not support a discussion of a sufficiently academic nature.

Some texts chosen for comparison in Category 2 were too disparate and again, the discussion did not work (e.g. 'The Great Gatsby' with 'Gilgamesh').

However, it was refreshing to see some new texts, or a popular text viewed from a fresh perspective or compared with a 'new' text.

Examples of research questions which lead to successful analysis included 'How does Eliza Haywood represent female voice and agency in her books 'Love in Excess' and 'Fantomina'?'; 'How, in similar and different ways, do the two poets Jalal ad-Din Rumi and Joy Harjo present the motif of the divine in their poems?'; 'How is a nature / nurture tension used to create a complex characterisation of the protagonist in the novel 'Ed King' by David Guterson?' and 'How are the protagonists from 'Wit' by Margaret Edson and 'Proof' by David Auburn analogous in the challenges they face?'

Other titles and topics which examiners particularly enjoyed included the use of outside works in John Green's 'Paper Towns' and 'The Fault in our Stars' (focusing on 'Leaves of Grass' and 'An Imperial Affliction' by Peter van Houten); the intrusive narrative voice in E.M. Forster; an exploration of racial identity in Nella Larsen's 'Passing', Vikas Swarup's employment of structure in 'Q & A', and essays on 'Love and Information' by Caryl Churchill and 'Americanah' by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

For category 3 essays, there needs to be a clear sense of a "text" and a discussion of the language elements at play in the "text". Three titles which offered the scope to do this are offered as examples: 'How do Margaret Thatcher and Barack Obama use pathos, ethos and logos to reach out to their audiences?' (Using 'This lady's not for turning' from 1980 and Obama's 2009 inauguration speech); 'To what extent do the language choices in the Nike World Cup TV advertisement appeal to the target audience?' and 'How has the portrayal of the LGBT community in stand-up comedy evolved from late 80s to the present day?'

Category 3 essays should be based on primary material that the candidates have had to analyse themselves. Essays where the candidates have merely gathered information from secondary sources and 'patched it together', so to speak, are not successful. Basing Category 3 essays only on questionnaires which have been completed by fellow students at the school is also inadvisable; as one examiner pointed out, creating a suitable questionnaire is a skilled task for which the candidate needs training.

As always, a few essays exceeded the word limit or dealt only with works in translation and candidates need to be aware of the penalties incurred in these cases.

It should be noted that for Category 3 essays also, texts chosen should be originally written in English.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: research question

The new Extended Essay Guide will place increased emphasis on the selection of a research question; and after 2016, the research question is required to be posed as a question, rather than expressed as a title or statement. This is a strategy which candidates could usefully adopt with immediate effect: as the draft TSM points out, “a properly-formulated research question enables students to maintain their focus more easily throughout the essay and to make a judgment as to whether they have responded to the research question.” It is also evident that the most successfully focused work invariably has a simply worded and tightly focused question as its starting-point.

Candidates should be reminded that overly broad topics (such as how different authors deal with the topic of racism in literature) rarely work because of a lack of focus and a lack of detailed treatment within the confines of the word count.

Very obvious or ‘well-worn’ topics (such as the portrayal of war in Owen’s poetry or Remarque’s ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’, or the social background in ‘Pride & Prejudice’) rarely offer new insights.

Other essays omitted to frame the research question to give the investigation a literary focus rather than one which was sociological, psychological, or historical in nature.

It is important to stress the importance of a closely-studied text or texts at the heart of a Category 3 essay, and in this category also, some research questions, and responses, were overly general and uncritical in focus. As mentioned again below, these tended to encourage students to simply write about their ideas and opinions without doing research or providing evidence for their statements.

Research questions often varied between the cover, the title page, the abstract and the introduction; consistency is required here.

Criterion B: introduction

Introductions often included irrelevant biographical material but failed to deal with the context and significance of the chosen topic.

Some candidates still needed to delineate the introduction more clearly.

Criterion C: investigation

Candidates need to consider the quality of secondary sources versus the quantity of sources chosen to support their treatment of the topic, and how these sources can be used to further the discussion and analysis in the essay. As one examiner pointed out, “many candidates appeared not to have really understood why they are used and what they might be able to do – and indeed how they might harm a personal perspective”.

Advice was almost unanimous: students need to get to grips with the primary source and use secondary sources (if any) of high quality, offering their own response to those sources.

Students need to be able to evaluate internet sources (see further comments below). Reliance on Schmoop, Wikipedia, Sparknotes etc. should be avoided. At the same time, candidates writing on established authors such as Bronte, Poe or Shakespeare should be expected to be familiar with, and make some use of, the volume of secondary criticism available.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

While most examiners felt that there was good knowledge and reasonable understanding, some essays lacked sufficient use of material from the texts (along with analysis and interpretation).

In Categories 1 and 2 there were many essays in which candidates clearly found difficulty in moving much beyond paraphrase/narrative, with a good deal of secondary material, often simply added for extra “weight” and rarely explored or considered in any meaningful way. Those candidates who chose more demanding texts tended to write with greater critical confidence.

Essays where candidates compared very disparate texts, those with vague topics, and those where there was no real comparison of the two texts, were also of poor quality.

Category 3 essays, also, had a tendency for the discussion of the text to lead to generalizations, assumptions and stereotypes resulting in fairly shallow understanding and analysis.

Students who scored highly on this criterion were able to demonstrate a confident knowledge of their text(s) and a genuine engagement with their chosen topic.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

In many essays, plot narration, descriptions, or mere biographical or contextual information remained the primary focus of the essay. Candidates often found it difficult to remain strictly relevant to the research question. Many candidates simply repeated the views found in secondary sources, as a substitute for their own analysis; few were able to use this critical reading to challenge, or to support their own argument in the essay.

Weaker candidates did not use the primary text at all but merely retold the story in a very general manner; as one examiner pointed out, “plot paraphrase does not demonstrate understanding and insight.”

A coherent and convincing argument was also hampered in some cases when candidates opted to discuss only a limited selection of examples from their texts, or to provide quotations without giving any background or context.

Where Category 3 essays took their examples out of textbooks or from a website, these were often less effective because of a failure to investigate and provide the original context necessary for the serious study of the word and/or image.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills

This seemed to be a key discriminator.

Once again the single most important failing under this criterion was the tendency for candidates to describe, narrate, summarize, or explain instead of analysing.

Criterion G: use of language appropriate to the subject:

Candidates should aim at least to express themselves in language which is “sometimes clear and appropriate”. They should employ literary terminology for Category 1 and 2 essays and appropriate media terminology for Category 3.

Criterion H: conclusion

The conclusion should offer a new synthesis in response to the research question and not merely summarise what has been said in the essay.

Criterion I: formal presentation

Candidates are strongly advised to consult the IB document ‘Effective citing and referencing’ for guidance.

URL addresses for websites, dates of accessing, etc., were often insufficiently cited in bibliographies and/or footnotes. More than a few examiners pointed out that footnote references tended to be unwieldy, with complete provenance stated every time, instead of ‘ibid’ or ‘op.cit.’

Marks were also lost for omitting citations, the table of contents or page numbers for the essay.

It would be helpful if students could include copies of the work(s) as an appendix if they are writing about poetry or unusual short stories. This would also be useful in many Category 3 essays where advertisements or speeches are taken from unusual sources, especially those not available on the internet.

As stated in the DPCNs, schools are also reminded that “footnotes and endnotes are not an essential part of the extended essay and examiners will not read them, or use any information contained within in the assessment of the essay. Students must take care to ensure that all information with direct relevance to the analysis, discussion and evaluation of their essay is contained in the main body of it. An essay that attempts to evade the word limit by including important material in footnotes or endnotes risks losing marks under several criteria.”

The organisation of the essay should also be given careful thought. For many literary topics, sub-headings can enhance, but more often detract from, the fluency of the essay.

A final proof-read is essential.

Criterion J: abstract

There is still a tendency for candidates to write the abstract as though it is some sort of introduction. It should be written after the completion of the essay and written in the past tense

Criterion K: holistic judgement

The best essays demonstrated a sophisticated level of understanding and research and genuine engagement with the topic.

It was difficult to award more than a “2” for essays on ‘well-worn’ topics, particularly those which did not acknowledge established criticism.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

Align essays with good practice outlined in the forthcoming Extended Essay Guide:

- Help students frame a research question as a question.
- Ask supervisors to write a comment for every essay
- Utilise the Reflections on Planning and Progress Form (available on the OCC) to help students organize their thinking throughout the process of undertaking their research and writing (if this is submitted with the essay, the supervisor’s summative comment should still appear on the inside cover of the essay)
- Offer the Researcher’s Reflective Space to students as a planning and research tool

(Many of the points above have been taken from the EE Update Report March 2015 which is available on the OCC. The draft TSM - designed to accompany the new EE Guide- also contains a section on common ‘stumbling-blocks’ which students and supervisors should find helpful).

Acknowledge and support the role of the supervisor

Many examiners noted the direct correlation between the quality of the supervision and the quality of the essay.

Most importantly, the supervisor should know, understand and apply all the guidelines and rubrics, and in doing so can act as the ‘gatekeeper’ of the essay. In a few centres candidates would have scored 4 or 5 marks more if their supervisor had taken more notice of penalties, missing Tables of Contents and bibliographies, and other administrative and layout issues. In addition, supervisors should focus on technical aspects such as the abstract, introduction, conclusion and formal presentation, to avoid unnecessary loss of marks.

Supervisor comments were very variable; some were detailed, effectively going through all marking criteria with evaluative comments while some were simply a brief comment on how interesting they and the candidate found the experience; some simply stated that the

candidate had met deadlines and done the research themselves; and in some centres there was no comment.

Guidance on writing appropriate supervisor's comments is available in the new EE Guide (see comments above).

Schools should ensure that supervisors are not expected to oversee too many essays (by limiting the number of students allocated to each supervisor if necessary) and that candidates are offered the recommended 4-5 hours of assistance.

Cases of academic misconduct are increasingly common and increasingly hard to spot. Supervisors who have mentored the whole process are the first line of defence here, and are better placed than an examiner to notice a mismatch between the student's own language and paragraphs of erudite comment. Essays containing ideas which are clearly not the candidate's own, especially where there is no secondary reading listed in the bibliography, arouse clear suspicion.

When supervisors change, it would be helpful if they left notes about the candidates and the progress of the essay so that useful comments can be made on the cover sheet. (The new Reflections on Planning and Progress Form will, however, help in this matter in future).

Other administrative points

Finally, in accordance with the examination instructions, the category of the essay should be clearly stated both on the front cover of the essay and on the title page.

Schools should make good use of the exemplar essays on the OCC with annotations and marks. These would help to make it clear to candidates how the assessment criteria are applied, as well as demonstrating what is meant by an introduction, conclusion, abstract and even analysis. Consulting such essays may also provide a clearer sense of what is acceptable in the way of referencing/citing.